DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 201 SO 027 195

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TITLE The Implications of the Individualism/Communitarian Debate for Civic Education: Observations and Prejudices.

PUB DATE Oct 96

NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Individualism and Community in a Democratic Society (Washington, DC, October 6-11, 1996).

PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Citizen Participation; *Citizenship Education; Citizenship Responsibility; *Civics; Critical Thinking; Decision Making; Democracy; Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Individualism; Intellectual History; *Liberalism; Secondary Education; *Theory Practice Relationship; Thinking Skills

IDENTIFIERS *Communitarianism

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates how civic education in the United States currently is impacted by the competing theories of individualism ("liberalism") and communitarianism. Each theory's intellectual history and meaning is explained briefly. The implications of the "debate between the defenders of liberalism and their communitarian critics for civic education," although few, include: educators' excessive concern for the affairs of the community ("mandatory voluntary community service" school programs); students' ability to evaluate liberal and communitarian claims (responsibility of citizenship); students' comprehension of democratic theory and the history of democratic practice; students' behavior in terms of the requirements of basic civility and responsibility (be on time, do homework, treat others with respect); and students' awareness of and desire to experience life's possibilities (including political involvement). Comparing democracy to the theater, civic educators need to prepare their students of democratic politics, when not acting, to be an audience of "enlightened and critical viewers, readers, and listeners" who attend most (but not necessarily all) political performances. (CB)

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# The Implications of the Individualism/Communitarian Debate for Civic Education: Observations and Prejudices

by Duane E. Smith

Presented to the International Conference on Individualism and Community in a Democratic Society; Washington, D.C., October 6-11, 1996. This conference was conducted by the Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, California and the Federal Center for Political Education of the Federal Republic of Germany.

SO 027 195

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# The Implications of the Individualism/Communitarian Debate for Civic Education
## Observations and Prejudices

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For the purposes of this discussion, I understand individualism to refer to liberalism, which received its classic formulation in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Bentham. A modern view of human beings and the political order, its development accompanied, if it was not actually the product of, the rise of industrial capitalism. Its fundamental value is individual liberty conceived strictly in negative terms---"the absence of external impediments to motion," as Hobbes would have it. Its view of the political community is austere, seeing it as the result of self-interested individuals entering into a contract to create a political association for the protection of purely private goods. It does not argue that human beings achieve the fulfillment of their highest potential in the political community. To the contrary, the political association protects them from the consequences of their own and others' lowest impulses. It is a theory of politics, it is not a theory of society. Politics is essential for purely prudential reasons. It has to do with the provision of security. It is not properly concerned with how individuals live their lives or with their behavior except to the extent that it affects the public order. It does not produce a community of friends who share common views about the nature of good and evil, as Aristotle claimed. Rather it transforms natural enemies

into civil associates who, driven by their own self-interest, join together in the political association for the attainment of security.

Communitarianism is a view of the individual, the state and society which has many adherents of many different stripes. Advocates of the doctrine are to be found on both the right and the left. Some advocates of communitarianism see themselves as defenders of liberalism, in spite of the fact that in almost every detail, it is anti-liberal. The communitarians appear to draw their inspiration from Aristotle's view of the polis, Rousseau's Geneva, and the New England town. They view the liberal notion of freedom as psychologically and morally deficient. Rather than the freedom to do what one wishes, freedom consists of obedience to the dictates of the higher self, the demands of morality. The person who is free is self-governing in the sense that she governs herself by subordinating the lower self to the higher and participates in the formulation of the laws that govern the community. The creation of these morally and politically autonomous persons requires the political order to attempt to make them virtuous. This may well mean the violation of liberal freedom and liberal privacy. Individuals do not participate in the political life of the community solely in order to prevent the consequences of their lowest impulses. They participate in it to share in the common pursuit of the common good which is the moral autonomy of the individual members of society who, in Rousseau's formulation, will be in harmony with themselves and consequently with each other. Following the dictates of reason and morality, individual citizens will share common views of good and evil. They will

become an Aristotelian community of friends. This is not simply a theory of the individual and the political order. It is a vision of a particular kind of society inhabited by virtuous citizens who share a common pursuit: the pursuit of the common good.

Contemporary communitarians in America emphasize the notion of the common good rather than individual rights with which, they claim, Americans are excessively involved. They are concerned with civic virtue and public spiritedness. They conceive of citizenship as a demanding activity in which the citizens should be actively involved. Many of them argue that involvement in the institutions of civil society is at least as important as participation in the political institutions of society. The alleged decline of civil society claimed by writers such as Robert Putnam in "Bowling Alone: Democracy in America at the End of the Twentieth Century" is a recurring theme.

The debate between the defenders of liberal individualism and the advocates of communitarianism in the United States is the most recent episode in the history of liberalism. Perhaps the single aspect of liberalism that has been the object of more criticism than any other is the liberal conception of community. (Some, of course, would claim that liberalism's individualism is so radical that it lacks any concept of community at all.) Thus we have Edmund Burke pining for "the little platoons of fellowship" that characterized feudal society and were destroyed by social, political, and economic modernization. And Marx leveled the same charge at industrial capitalism

for having destroyed the groups that had provided men with security and comfort in precapitlist society and left them imprisoned in their own naked egotism.

The career of liberalism in the United States has not been any different. While liberal assumptions have triumphed in the United States as they have nowhere else, they have, from the beginning existed in tension with a more organic and communitarian view of the political community. John Winthrop preaching to his followers on board the "Arabella" in 1630 insisted that, "all true Christians are of one body in Christ....The ligaments of this body which knitt together are love....All the parts of this body being thus united are made soe contiguous in a speciall reelacion as they must needs partake of each others strength, infirmity, joy and sorrowe, weale and woe....If one member suffers all suffer with it, if one be in honour, all rejoyce with it." George Fitzhugh in his apologia for the institution of chattel slavery attacked liberalism and capitalism for reducing society to a "bag of cats biting and worrying each other." Society had, he insisted, once been a "band of brothers, working for the common good." All of this had been destroyed by the classical economists and the contract theorists. "We believe no heresy in moral science has been more pregnant of mischief than this theory of Locke," he wrote.

The utopian fantasies of Edward Bellamy contested with the radical individualism of William Graham Sumner. Today, communitarians continue this effort at least to bend the individualistic assumptions of liberalism to their wish to recapture what they

believe to have been the advantages of a more communitarian concept of society.

Life rarely has the clarity of theory. Even those of us who are most invigorated by Hobbes' frigid view of the nature of society and charmed by Thoreau's airy dismissal of it, will agree that it is impossible, except perhaps as an imaginative exercise, to think of the individual apart from society. And even the most enthusiastic communitarian, I assume, recoils from the totalitarian possibilities of a Rousseauean community. (Sometimes they deny the existence of those possibilities.)

Forty years ago, David Riesman wrote, "Those who bewail the loss of values seem disingenuously to bewail the loss--that is, the replacement--of their own values;...for many of the men whom I find to be most hysterical about the loss of values appear to me to lack confidence in their own ongoing process of valuation; they do not enjoy making choices, and their effort to escape from freedom is writ larger than life in their overly subjective appraisal of society as a whole." While it is not my task to evaluate the merits of the debate, it seems to me that Riesman's observations are equally applicable to those who bewail the loss of community.

One often has the sense that the communitarian critique of liberalism is an attempt to escape from the complexities of the modern condition and a reluctance to admit that it is likely that nobody knows the causes or the cures for the ailments of democracy. Indeed, there is no agreement on whether these ailments exist and what they are.

My task is to comment on the implications of the debate between the defenders of liberalism and their communitarian critics for civic education. I am bound to admit that, in spite of the fact that I suggested this topic, the implications seem to me to be few. I cannot claim to know what the communitarians' prescriptions for civic education are, but they seem in the main to consist of programs that promote "groupiness," an excessive concern for the affairs of the community, and busyness.

My experience with adolescents is limited. (I assume that at lease most college students are presumed to have gone beyond this stage.) However, I have not been struck by their unwillingness to become involved in the groups which make up the civil society of youth and which they call "cliques." And one can become weary merely watching their multifarious activities and involvements. And who is not charmed by the occasional young person who is more interested in music or literature than in politics, who finds Balzac far more compelling than a current campaign or the social issue of the moment? What, after all, is youth for if not for following the whims of one's own interests and indulging in the extravagant fantasies of the uninhibited imagination of the young. Instead of encouraging the young to be young, many of us nag them to become more involved in the affairs of the community and to perform their duties to society. There is something terribly Protestant about all this.

Hence, we find many people in education advocating oxymoronic programs such as mandatory voluntary community service. What is most striking about the fad for

community service is its apoliticism. Preparing food for the homeless shelter is said to be part of becoming a good citizen when in fact it has nothing to do with being a good citizen at all. It may be part of becoming a good person with a decent concern for one's fellow human beings. As such, it is part of what we at least like to think is the natural compassion which all morally sensitive persons possess. A person lacking this quality of compassion is commonly thought to be morally defective, somehow corrupted, and to be saved, if at all, by religion or philosophy.

Citizenship is another matter entirely. It requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and the development of understanding. It requires, for example, knowledge about the institutions of government and understanding what those institutions are supposed to do. Citizenship requires the ability to make reasoned judgements about a multitude of political issues as well as about what issues should be considered political and which are more appropriately dealt with in nonpolitical ways. Finally, a student should acquire the ability to evaluate the claims made by liberals and communitarians.

In order to do this, the student should begin to comprehend democratic theory and the history of democratic practice. This would seem to require, for American students, an understanding of the way in which democratic theory has been adapted to the circumstances of this country. Since citizenship implies some form and degree of activity, the young person needs to become acquainted with the ways in which the

individual person can participate in the various groups in society and politics, and how this participation may relate to his or her life.

I do not mean, of course, that education for citizenship is simply a question of developing the pupil's intellectual abilities and extending his or her body of knowledge. It goes without saying that the habits of life that make up character also need to be shaped. One may argue about the extent to which this is the responsibility of the schools. There are those who believe that too much attention is given to "socialization" and insufficient attention to education in American schools today. Whatever one's position on this, most of us would agree that the schools do have a role to play in this process. James Q. Wilson suggested to me when I spoke with him about civic education that all the schools need to do is insist that the pupils come to school on time, do their homework, and treat each other and the teacher with respect. There is something to this, for it is hard to see that pupils who do not acquire these habits are likely candidates for full membership in the community.

In addition, however, to habituating the pupils to the requirements of basic civility and responsibility, which must be supported by the family and other institutions such as the church, the school surely should make the pupils aware of the possibilities offered in life and develop and encourage in them a desire to experience many of these possibilities. These possibilities include, among others, various types of political involvement.

Michael Walzer has pointed out that democracy, like the theater, requires an audience as well as actors. Being a spectator is not passive. The spectator is critical and, one hopes enlightened. The actors need the audience as the audience needs them. They play upon the audience, but they are also aware that if displeased, if the reviews are bad, there may be no audience tomorrow. And so in politics, or at least democratic politics. The political actors if they are to perform well require enlightened and critical audiences. Often, of course, the audience is not enlightened and not critical. The problem of democratic politics may not be so different from the problems of art, literature, and music. There is no shortage of performers. The shortage is in enlightened and critical viewers, readers, and listeners.

Walzer writes, "Nonparticipants have rights....But nonparticipants also have functions...." Perhaps in our preoccupation with the notion of citizenship as one form of activity, we have overlooked this fact. We think of citizenship in terms of Aristotle's notion of "ruling and being ruled in turn." But watching with discernment and forming intelligent judgements is also an activity. And this activity of the "nonparticipant" is essential. Just as the connoisseur is essential to the artist, so the watchful observer, the citizen making informed judgements, is essential to the political actor.

Of course, to be a spectator requires attending the performance in the first place. It doesn't require attending every performance. The lover of Wagner may be loathe to

spend an evening with Puccini. Similarly the political spectator may not attend the entire spectacle of politics. And some, of course, will choose not to attend at all. But just as the theater would not survive if everyone decided not to attend, so democracy would not survive without its spectators.

Our function as civic educators is not to badger our pupils into a life of constant political involvement. It is to show them the importance of being attentive spectators. They should also learn how to be involved in more "active" forms of citizenship, if that is what they wish to do. Finally, we need to make clear that there is nothing wrong with bowling alone. And sometimes we might decide not to bowl at all.